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**HERSCHEL VESPASIAN JOHNSON.**

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Herschel Vespasian Johnson was born on September 18, 1812, in Burke County, Georgia to which place his father, Moses Johnson had removed from Edgefield County, South Carolina. He was descended from Richard Johnson belonging to a family prominent in Virginia history as producing men in public life. He graduated from the University of Georgia in 1834. He studied law under Judge Gould in Augusta, Ga., and was admitted to practice in 1835. He married a niece of President James K. Polk about this time. In 1839 he removed to Jefferson County, Ga. where he bought a large plantation, and for the remainder of his life was a lawyer-planter. He quickly rose to prominence at the bar. It was said of him about 1840: "He was then but twenty-eight years of age, large and bulky of figure, a smooth face looking like an over grown boy, that when he arose, his hearers did not expect much because of his evident timidity but they were soon surprised by listening to one of the most powerful orators in the state or Union."

He was more or less interested in politics till 1849, when he was appointed by Gov. Towns to fill the unexpired term of United States Senator Colquitt, who had resigned. He served in the United States Senate from February 14, 1848 to March 3, 1849. He powerfully supported the administration of President Polk. John C. Calhoun is said to have pronounced Gov. Johnson as one of the ablest senators of his time. Hr. A. H. Stephens says of him: "His ability is well known. As an orator, he is logical and brilliant. As a jurist, he stands high in the estimation of the legal profession. He was in the senate of the United States a short time, where he acquired considerable reputation amongst the distinguished men of that body in 1848. As an orator, constitutional lawyer and jurist, Mr. Johnson has few superiors in the U. S." In 1849, he was elected Judge of the Superior Court of the Ocmulgee District. The following is a contemporary sketch of him published many years ago, taken from an old southern paper called "The Plantation": "Well do I remember, though at that time but a boy, when Johnson first made his appearance in public life in this part of the state. It was in the year 1844, as a member of the Electoral

ticket put forward by the Democratic party in order to seek the vote of Georgia for Polk. He was the candidate for elector of the 7th Congressional District then represented by Hon. A. H. Stephens, who had for a number of years actively and successfully engaged in public life, and who had, even at that early day acquired a reputation for such eloquence, such withering sarcasm in debate as to have gained for himself the appellation of the 'Randolph of Georgia.' Johnson had not been so much in public life. The first time I heard him on the hustings was the year mentioned 1844. It was in the village of Eatonton. He and Colquitt were to address the people. Johnson got up first and made a few cold phlegmatic remarks. He was up but a short time, appeared timid, ungainly and confused, committed several provoking blunders which confused him still more. His audience had no patience with him. If I remember correctly he was not greeted with a single round of applause. Boy as I was, I felt sorry for him, for I thought he seemed mortified. But his confusion was soon lost sight of and he allowed to sink into obscurity which I have no doubt he coveted, by means of every eye being fixed upon the 'invincible in debate,' the remarkable man, Colquitt. Such was the effect of the wild rugged eloquence of their fiery orator that no one had time to think of Johnson. But soon after this there was to be a 'free discussion' in Eatonton—a thing bearing a very striking resemblance to a 'free fight' and therefore when such is going on you may always 'count me out'. In this 'free discussion,' Johnson and Baxter the latter a very intelligent man and amiable gentleman, but not a popular orator, were the champions of Democracy while Stephens and Meriwether, himself of no mean abilities, and of large experience—were to uphold the cause of Whiggery and Clay. An easy victory was anticipated over Johnson and Baxter. Besides the eloquence and ready power of debate of Stephens, it has been remarked that the speech of Meriwether on that day was the best and most eloquent he ever made. If I remember correctly the order of debate, first Baxter spoke, then Meriwether, then Johnson followed with half of the time allotted to him, then came Stephens and Johnson closed with the remaining portion of his allotted time. At any rate, the tug of war was between Johnson and Stephens—the former having the

close. This was arranged in the order of debate in order to put the two orators in each side more nearly on terms of equality.

"Johnson's first speech was somewhat after the order of the one I have already described, but somewhat better. Baxter's was a good argumentative speech. Meriwether was full of ability, taunts and invective. Stephen's possessed all the usual attributes of this cultivated orator. When he sat down, Whig rejoiced, Democrat seemed cast down, and the field was in possession of those who fought for Henry Clay. The most overwhelming defeat brooded over the Democratic banner. True, Johnson was to reply. But what could be expected of him? He who had already made two failures before the audience that was his on this occasion. But he arose to occupy his remaining time, and it was evident that the very depths of his soul had been stirred. He had been the sleeping lion, and now he was stung to madness. Rage planted eloquence in every feature, and he had not spoken a dozen words before his hearers saw that thunderbolts were forging in his brain and bosom. He spoke a few words more, and now as he launched some barbed dart of ivory, tipped with the sulphurous fire kindled in the conflict—some winged shaft of sarcasm dipped in worinwood, and gall against those who had wantoned with his feelings, and presumed upon his inertia, sound after sound of applause greeted him—cheer after cheer made the welkin ring, and he mounted higher and higher in the heavens of genuine burning oratory, soaring upon the wings which bore Demosthenes in his rugged fiery eloquence. Everything gave way before his impetuous, scathing, blighting, blasting invective. He rushed upon his foes with the clangor of the trumpet and the flash of the battle-ax. Like Richard Coeur de Lion, among the scimitars of Saladin, he strode on, right on, dealing his stalwart blows right and left, and everything was borne down by his ponderous arm. Like the sleeping lion aroused from his lair by some careless intruder, he sprang upon his victims, tore their flesh, crunched their bones, and beat their bodies to a jelly by hurling them against the earth that trembled to the thunders of his infuriated howls. Like the mad bull in the arena, he rushed upon those who pricked him with their spear, gored into their vitals, tossed them into the air and trampled them under his feet. Like Murat he charged the pha-

lanx of his foes, and spread ruin and devastation before him. Like Junot, whom the French named the 'trumpet' he rushed upon the arguments of his opponents and swept them like gossamer before him. He not only slew the Hectors with whom he had to contend, but like Achilles, hitched their dead bodies to his chariot wheels and dragged them in implacable and bitter triumph over the field of battle. Whigs even were forced to admit that he had won back the field which had been so ingloriously lost to the Democracy. From this time on Johnson's reputation as an orator was established. And now there is none to question his abilities or deny him unsurpassed eloquence when properly aroused. Were I an orator, I know of no man not even the 'terrible Toombs' himself whom I would not sooner meet on the stump than Johnson. His ponderous logic, his fine knowledge of facts, but above all his crushing, withering sarcasm, render him invincible.

"But it is not as a stump orator, or politician alone that Johnson excels. He possesses a fine belles-Lettres, taste and scholarship, always winning applause and at each successive effort soaring higher. I heard him deliver a short address a few years ago upon awarding the premiums to some Sophomore prize declaimers, which, as a piece of fine rhetoric and tasteful eloquence blended with chaste composition, stands a model in the English language. If the measure of his attainments and fame should be his ability and his merit fortune has nothing too good or too high for him. Of all the men I have ever heard speak, Johnson and Toombs are the greatest masters of invective, and consequently the greatest stump orators. I have often heard it mooted which excels as a popular speaker. Perhaps for a short speech Toombs does. For a long one, it is quite questionable whether he does or not. Toombs is always ready. It takes a good deal to arouse Johnson so that he shall show to the best advantage. Johnson has to wait to get up a good head of steam. Toombs keeps a full supply constantly on hand. It is absolutely necessary to his prosperity that he should blow off rather frequently. Johnson can better afford to 'nurse his wrath to keep it warm', without danger of bursting. Toombs would put on the same head of steam to go a mile that he would to go a million. Johnson would have to go some distance before he got to running well. Toombs

is obliged to talk. Johnson can sometimes be silent. If Toombs were a vinegar cask, he never could be prevailed upon to hold the cider longer than for it to become a good sharp wholesome beverage. Johnson could keep it until it would dissolve ten-penny nails. Toombs, besides some logic and much invective, has a good deal of wit, humor, pleasantry and blarney. Johnson has none of the latter four, but has much logic, powerful invective and fine rhetoric. Johnson can't take any side but what he believes to be the right one, and to defend the wrong would be as weak as a child. It makes no kind of difference with Toombs, he is just as powerful on the wrong side as on the right, and if there were a thousand other sides besides the right one and the wrong one he could make, not only a respectable but a brilliant showing for any of them. If you were fighting with Toombs he would box you and bite you, and scratch you, and kick you, and cuff you and gouge you. Johnson would stand up straight, never closing in, never grappling, never thrusting, but would greet you with powerful sledge-hammer blows every pop. If you were Toombs' victim, he would take time to torture and toy with you, like a cat does with the mouse, before destroying you. Like the lion, Johnson would put an end to you at one blow if he could, for whatsoever his hand findeth to do he doeth it with his might. Johnson defeated would be the peer of Toombs victorious; whilst Toombs, if it is possible to imagine him beaten, would be the worst whipped man in creation, because he would not be used to it. Toombs would perhaps excel Johnson in a little scrimmage, while Johnson would be dead sure always to prevail in a bear fight.

"It must be borne in mind that in what I have been saying for some time back, I have been viewing Johnson and Toombs from a stump-speaking point of view. Their powers in this line are but a small portion of their capabilities. They are giants in intellect. And should the friends of Johnson succeed in placing him in the United States Senate, Georgia will be more ably represented in that august body than any other state in the Union."

In 1853, he was elected Governor of Georgia and was reelected in 1855. He was a distinguished governor and discharged the duties of that office with great credit to himself and honor to the State. His State papers are models of classic English. He

was always a master of correct, elegant and eloquent style. No governor of Georgia has filled this office with more ability. His greatest work was just before the breaking out of the Civil War in endeavoring to save the Union. While he believed in the rights of the states, yet was passionately attached to the Union.

After retiring from the governor's chair, he spent the years immediately preceding the war in the vain effort to postpone the conflict. In the great campaign of 1860, Gov. Johnson was the candidate for Vice-President of the Douglass ticket.

Stephen A. Douglass was one of the great statesmen of the country. He believed that slavery was a question for each state to settle for itself. He stood squarely on the Constitution and the laws formed in pursuance thereof. One is not surprised to see so able a man as Governor Johnson supporting a ticket that stood for conservatism and made for the preservation of the Union.

After the election of Mr. Lincoln the whole South burned and blazed and talk of secession was in the air. They held that a state had a right to secede but that it was not expedient. That the time had not come to exercise that right. At the Georgia secession convention, Governor Johnson framed the resolutions against immediate secession, but calling for a convention of all the slave states to consider what were best to be done. He was put forward as a leader. The opening of the resolutions was as follows: "The State of Georgia is attached to the Union, and desires to preserve it." These resolutions were put forward as a substitute for the secession resolution offered by former Congressman and Supreme Court Judge Nisbet. South Carolina and several other states had already seceded. I quote a graphic pen picture of what followed, copied from *Bethany* written by Hon. Thomas E. Watson of Georgia. It is a brilliant word painting by one of the ablest writers ever before the American public:

"The speeches which Mr. Stephens made against immediate secession were great efforts—that before the Georgia Legislature in November, especially. The speeches of Ben Hill in the convention in January were great efforts but, so far as it went, the pleas for the Union made by Herschel V. Johnson overtopped them all.

"Johnson was of massive build, ponderous in mind as well as in body. He was lazy, not easily aroused, but when he was aroused, a foeman worthy of any man's steel. On such rare occasions there was a power in him that was colossal.

"At the Milledgeville Convention, in January, 1861, he was in his prime. His very port and stature imposed respect, commanded attention, riveted interest. Those who saw him that day when he pleaded for the life of the Union of our fathers will never forget him. In the densely packed house, not a man stirred as this brave Georgian rose and came forward to do battle for his convictions. He has submitted a minority report, adverse to immediate secession, as against the majority report, which sought to lead Georgia in the wake of South Carolina, which had already seceded. 'Ben' Yancey, brother to William L. Yancey, spoke first, and for the majority report. Then came Johnson; it was evident that he was intensely excited; for once, he was profoundly agitated. All his sluggishness had dropped from him, and he stood at bay, full of the fire of combat. He felt that he stood on the weaker side, but he had the look of a man who gathers up all his strength to strike, and to fight it out, though he dies.

"Lifting his right arm and clenched fist above his head, his broad chest heaving with suppressed excitement, he cast his eyes all round the convention, and slowly said: 'I am a Democrat!' Step by step he strode forward with the might of a giant. Then followed Johnson's masterpiece in the way of oratory. He climbed the heights of persuasion, reason and entreaty. He warned the convention that they were about to destroy the greatest nation since the dawn of time. His was the eloquence of sadness, warning and despair. He begged his hearers with tears streaming from his eyes to stop before it was too late. To say that his hearers were profoundly moved would be putting it mildly. He seemed to be holding them in the hollow of his hand and they responded to his every word and gesture. His hold on the convention was one of the marvelous triumphs of oratory. While in the midst of his speech an adjournment was had for dinner. It has been common rumor that he was drugged during the dinner hour. At any rate, when he tried to resume his speech, he was able only to articulate some words that were for-



eign to the subject and seemed to be dazed and out of his mind. His friends led him away and the spell of the orator was broken. Those in favor of secession walked into the breach and carried Georgia out of the Union. 'Bill Arp' the great Georgia writer states that many people thought that if this great speech could have been completed, Georgia would have remained in the Union and there would have been no war."

Johnson served in the Confederate senate and gave loyal support to President Davis. After the surrender Johnson was confined in a northern prison. He was afterward released by President Andrew Johnson at the personal solicitation of the widow of Stephen A. Douglass; Douglass, his old running mate.

He was president of the Georgia Constitutional Convention in 1865.

In 1866, along with Mr. Stephens he was elected U. S. Senator but the Federal senate would not allow him to take his seat.

In 1872 he was elected Judge of the middle circuit of Georgia and he served in that capacity till his death at his home in Jefferson County on August 16, 1880.

It is stated that after Georgia seceded he was much depressed in mind and spirits and broken in body—he was never the same man in either manner or appearance thereafter.

"His private character was exemplary and there was never a suspicion of any of his motives on the part of friend or opponent, and he was recognized as a patriot of the highest type."

He is survived at the present time by one daughter, Mrs. Talulah Horne of Dalton, Ga., and descendants in a remoter degree.

C. J. RAMAGE.

*Saluda, S. C.*